ASHE TO AMEN EXPLORES THE CROSSROADS OF AESTHETICS AND BELIEF IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART

Exhibition Makes First Traveling Stop at Reginald F. Lewis Museum, in Collaboration With MICA, June 22–Sept. 29

BALTIMORE – The traveling exhibition *Ashe to Amen: African Americans and Biblical Imagery*—curated by Leslie King-Hammond, Ph.D., graduate dean emerita and founding director of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA)—will present African-American artists’ interpretations of Biblical stories and traditions through historic and contemporary art at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture from Saturday, June 22–Sunday, Sept. 29. *Ashe to Amen* is among the first scholarly explorations into how the Bible has informed the multicultural African-American community’s evolving artistic expression. A press preview is scheduled for Wednesday, June 19, 10–11 a.m.

*Ashe to Amen* presents the ever-shifting intersections of aesthetics and belief through reoccurring themes of creation, revelation, faith, liberation and identity. The exhibition showcases a wide range of artistic expression through approximately 60 works of art and design, dating from the late 19th century through today by nearly 50 African-American artists, 25 of whom are still active.

Featured artists include the well-known Romare Bearden, Sister Gertrude Morgan and Henry Ossawa Tanner as well as established contemporary artists, such as Rashida Bumbray and Xenobia Bailey. In addition to work by King-Hammond, MICA artists include: painter, sculptor and educator Willie Birch ’73 (MFA in Art Education); editorial, commercial and fine artist photographer Carl Clark ’86 (photography); fine art photographer, educator and photojournalist Linda Day Clark ’94 (photography); multimedia artist Oletha DeVane ’73 (general fine arts); retired art education faculty member and quilter Joan M.E. Gaither, Ed.D.; Rinehart School of Sculpture Director and sculptor Maren Hassinger; fashion designer Januwa Moja ’79 (crafts); multimedia artist Joyce J. Scott ’70 (art education); painter Arvie Smith ’92 (LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting); and Nigerian-American visual artist and student Adejoke Tugbiyele ’13 (Rinehart School of Sculpture).

Although reading was largely banned for blacks in antebellum America and the content of books was inaccessible to many African Americans until the rise of literacy in the 20th century, the Bible has been known through oral tradition for generations. For the African Americans who learned to read and write, it was a joy that defied slavery and gave bonded people a means of exacting intellectual freedom, affirmation of self, family and community. The Bible’s narrative and parables provided artists of African descent with the inspiration, contexts and themes to
express their responses to the harsh and frequently incongruous realities of life in America.

“Ashe to Amen: African Americans and Biblical Imagery explores complex questions about how African Americans used and interpreted the Bible since the first encounters Africans had in the New World,” King-Hammond said. “African Americans who did learn to read did so as much as an act of resistance as an act of liberation. Artists took it one step further to use their brilliant imaginations and technical skills to re-tell the stories of the Bible through an African cultural perspective and express positive meaning in their lives in the face of incredible hostilities.”

The exhibition’s title includes terms commonly used in African and African-American communities: amen and ashe (or ase in a variant spelling), a word from the Yoruba (Nigeria) language. Among the Yoruba, ashe (pronounced AH-shay) is a crucial dynamic of the “inner eye” of the creativity of an artist and the power to make something happen. Western scholars also interpret the term to mean power, authority or life force. The words are affirmations—essentially, “so be it”—both in America and throughout the African diaspora.

“One of my favorite sections is the display of treasured family Bibles and other sacred objects. These show the rich material culture artists are drawing upon, whether as sustenance in their own lives or as inspiration for their creative output,” said Michelle Joan Wilkinson, Ph.D., Reginald F. Lewis Museum’s director of collections & exhibitions.

Exhibition Highlights

The 1935 Preacher is a nearly two-foot-tall limestone sculpture by William Edmondson, who began to work as a sculptor in his 50s and was the first African-American artist to receive a one-man show at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1937. His creations were designed initially as grave markers or headstones for the members of his community.

World War I veteran Horace Pippin’s 1945 The Holy Mountain III painting shows leopards and lions in a peaceable kingdom setting, a subject employed by artists for centuries that recalls Isaiah’s prophecy of the lion lying down with the lamb. Pippin often addressed slavery and segregation in his work, and spectral figures cloaked in the darkness of woods in the background add an ominous element to the otherwise pastoral painting. Pippen died the year after the painting was completed.

Following World War II, many African-American artists received formal training thanks to funding provided by the G.I. Bill. Among them was Benny Andrews, the son of a sharecropper and grandson of a slave, who studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A figurative expressionist painter, Andrews created earthly images inspired by the Bible’s rich world of religious personalities, including the 1977 Angel, showing a woman playing a harp under a golden-orange sun.

Chester Higgins, Jr. constructs a photograph, Bible and Drum made in 1989, that suggests how performance inspired by the spoken word can pull together a community by evoking traditional African music and dance and their relationship to the Bible in a scene captured in a church located in Bronx, New York. This work is a key example of the intersections between ashe, through the drum, and amen, through the Bible.

Januwa Moja’s ’79 Crown of Thorns for the Visionary, from 1997, is made of glass shards discarded on the street, which represent brokenness—of dreams, hopes, promises and hearts—symbolically healed in this work, making the separate shards whole and new again. Drawing inspiration from a moment during Jesus’ crucifixion—the crown of thorns mockingly placed on his head—Moja combines Jesus’ redemptive suffering and sacrifice with the hardships faced and overcome by Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, the women this work celebrates and commemorates.

Church of the Crossroads, a neon installation by Renée Stout, references the neon signs found on the façades of storefront churches. Church of the Crossroads, made from 1999–2000, is part of Stout’s ongoing works that look at how people of African descent have created new meanings from intersections of Biblical texts and American and African belief systems.

Mixed-media contemporary works by Baltimore-based artists include the 2009 Inkisi: St. John the Conqueror by Joyce J. Scott ’70 and the 2012 Pulpit by Loring Cornish. Inkisi: St. John the Conqueror incorporates recycled glass bottles that symbolize vessels for sacred elements or the resting place for spirits in African and African-American cultures—to explore art that intersects both Christian and African belief systems. In Pulpit, Cornish acknowledges
the power of a minister’s preaching with the glass and mirror mosaic as a metaphor for the minister’s interpretive work of understanding the community’s wants and needs while adding perspective through Biblical insight and acknowledgement of day-to-day realities.

Programming
Curator’s Talk: Art, Religion and Storytelling
Saturday, June 29, 1 p.m.
Reginald F. Lewis Museum
Museum admission required; sign language interpretation services provided.
Join King-Hammond and exhibition artists for a gallery walk and discussion of how African-American artists interpret Biblical stories and traditions through historic and contemporary works.

Traveling Exhibition

Publication
The accompanying publication, *Ashe to Amen: African Americans and Biblical Imagery*, edited by King-Hammond and published by MOBIA, will be available in spring 2013. In addition to King-Hammond, contributors include Debra Ambush, Ph.D.; Tritobia Benjamin, Ph.D.; Aiden Faust, M.L.S.; Fayth M. Parks, Ph.D.; Lowery Stokes Sims, Ph.D.; and Vincent L. Wimbush, Ph.D.

Organizer and Funding
Ashe to Amen: African Americans and Biblical Imagery is organized by Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) in New York City. Major support for MOBIA’s exhibitions and programs has been provided by American Bible Society and by Howard and Roberta Ahmanson. Ashe to Amen: African Americans and Biblical Imagery is made possible by the generous support of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. The exhibition was also supported by charitable gifts from David and Tina Segel, James and LaFaye Lewis, Norman Friedland, Robert Muzikowski, Robert and Genie Stine, TeKontrol, *New York Amsterdam News* and New York Theological Seminary.

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Reginald F. Lewis Museum programs and exhibitions are supported by grants from the Baltimore County Executive, County Council and Commission on Arts & Sciences and from the Maryland State Arts Council, an agency dedicated to cultivating a vibrant cultural community where the arts thrive.

MICA receives funding from an operating grant from the Maryland State Arts Council.

MICA’s Center for Race and Culture
Launched in October 2008, the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) is an interactive division that researches and investigates the dynamics of race and culture and their relationships to visual art traditions and practices. One of the center’s stated goals is to prepare students for leadership roles in the regional, national and international art world. The center is a site where scholars, doctoral candidates, artists, critics, musicians, actors and historians can research or create events, exhibitions, projects or performances that focus on the aesthetic dynamics of race and culture with the intent to break down racial barriers and build bridges of cultural understanding and meaningful and productive relationships. MICA is the first school of this type to create a research center dedicated to the study of race and culture in the arts. For more information, visit [mica.edu/raceandculture](http://mica.edu/raceandculture).

Reginald F. Lewis Museum’s Visitor Information
Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, located at 830 E. Pratt St., is open Wednesdays–Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays, noon to 5 p.m. Admission: Reginald F. Lewis Museum members, children 6 and under, and Maryland public school teachers (with ID): free; senior citizens (65+), youth
Reginald F. Lewis Museum is Baltimore's premier facility highlighting the history and accomplishments of African Americans with a special focus on Maryland's African American community. A Smithsonian affiliate, the museum is the East Coast's largest African-American museum occupying an 82,000-square-foot facility with ample permanent and special exhibition space, interactive learning environments, auditorium, resource center, oral history recording studio, museum shop, cafe, classrooms, meeting rooms, outside terrace and reception areas. The museum is located near Baltimore's Inner Harbor at the corner of Pratt and President streets. The museum is also accessible on Baltimore's Charm City Circulator Orange and Green Routes.

Founded in 1826, Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) is the oldest continuously degree-granting college of art and design in the nation. The College enrolls nearly 3,500 undergraduate, graduate and continuing studies students from all 50 states and 57 countries in fine arts, design, electronic media, art education, liberal arts, and professional studies degree and non-credit programs. Redefining art and design education, MICA is pioneering interdisciplinary approaches to innovation, research, and community and social engagement. Alumni and programming reach around the globe, even as MICA remains a cultural cornerstone in the Baltimore/Washington region, hosting hundreds of exhibitions and events annually by students, faculty and other established artists.

Located near Lincoln Center in New York City, Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) celebrates and interprets art related to the Bible and its cultural legacy in Jewish and Christian traditions through exhibitions, education and scholarship. For more information, please visit www.mobia.org.

Image captions (left-right): Joyce J. Scott ’70, Inkisi: St. John the Conqueror, collected glass bottles, glass beads, wire, thread and coral, 18.5 x 24.5 x 18.5 in., 2009, courtesy of Goya Contemporary; retired MICA faculty member Joan M.E. Gaither, My Spiritual Family, mixed media, cloth and fibers, 104 x 98 in., 2003, courtesy of the artist; Renée Stout, Church of the Crossroads, neon and wood, 52 x 37 x 3 in., 1999-2000, courtesy of the artist and Hemphill Arts; Chester Higgins, Jr., Bible and Drum, digital silver gelatin print, 1989, © Chester Higgins Jr./chesterhiggins.com, image courtesy the Museum of Biblical Art; and Januwa Moja ’79, Crown of Thorns for the Visionary, found broken glass wrapped in brass and copper wire, embellished with beads, 28 x 15 in., 1997, courtesy of the artist, photo by Rich Green.